

For Immediate Release
February 24, 2004

Contact: Hannah Willmann
(573) 751-2853

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH BILL BECOMES FIRST SENATE BILL PASSED BY SENATE AND HOUSE

JEFFERSON CITY -- The Missouri House today passed the Children's Mental Health Reform Act introduced by Sen. Michael R. Gibbons, R-Kirkwood, and sent it to the Governor. Senate Bill 1003, the first bill passed by the Senate and House this session, would reform and reorganize the state's children's mental health services.

"This bill is our opportunity to right a horrible wrong," Gibbons said. "In my 11 years in the legislature, this is the most vicious attack on families I have encountered.

"Currently, when parents reach the end of their ropes, the state does something that I find abdominal," Gibbons said. "The state says 'we can help you, but you will have to give up custody, and your name will be placed on the Child Abuse and Neglect Registry' if they want to receive the care they need."

After giving up custody to the state, parents lose the ability to have any decision-making power in their child's life. This measure will end that practice by bringing together the Department of Mental Health with the various other children's health groups within the state, and combining the funding involved with each of these groups. It also begins a comprehensive program of children's mental health that keeps families involved in decisions concerning the care of their child and provides better care for more kids with the same amount of money.

"We are trying to create a family-friendly system with this bill," Gibbons said. "Right now, there are good practices in these departments. We are trying to do is pool together these good practices to make the system more efficient and effective for families to access."

-MORE-

The bill specifies that the departments create a plan of treatment for each child, then submit it to the court and inform parents that they can actively participate in the plan. Children who need only mental health services may be returned to their family's custody, and services shall be provided in the least restrictive environment.

“For far too long, we have forced parents of children with mental health problems to relinquish the custody of their children in order to receive care that the Division of Family Services provides,” Gibbons said.

According to DFS, there are almost 600 children in the state whose custody has been relinquished to the state. These children are not Medicaid eligible, and their parents often are told their insurance is no longer enough to cover medical costs.

“We have been working very closely with the Department of Mental Health, Division of Family Services, Citizens for Missouri’s Children and others, who all believe that the situation can be resolved using funds they already have,” Gibbons said.

“Fixing this problem is a top priority for the Senate, and this is why it has been our first piece of legislation to pass this year,” said Gibbons, who also serves as Majority Floor Leader.

Senate Bill 1003 passed unanimously through both the Senate and the House.

Sen. Gibbons currently serves as Majority Floor Leader in the Senate and represents the 15th Senatorial District.

####